Chapter 1: Nearer to Him Than His Jugular Vein

To keep a secret, one must believe it does not exist.

Ten years ago, I started engineering my life around that Promise. I was sitting at the glass dining table of the three-bedroom apartment we used to live in. I imagined what it would be like if I told Him the truth once He returned from the *ʿIshāʾ ṣalāh* (night prayer). On the other side of the table, His great white beard and milk-white *thawb* (Arab ankle-length robe) appeared like an immovable marble pillar. His imposing figure made the worst-case scenario come so easily to my imagination.

"You are my son, Yahya!" He roared. "Why are you listening to *waswas* (whisperings of Satan)? You're thinking like a stupid idiot!"

I reminded myself that this was not who He was. He was a reasonable person who would listen if I found the right words to say. We believed in the laws of Islam, and this belief became a neurotic reordering of our lives. What I could eat. What I could wear. What I could see. Who I could meet. Who I could love. Who I could be. Every aspect of my life was subject to scrutiny as I relentlessly asked myself if what I wanted to do was *ḥalāl* (permitted) or *ḥarām* (forbidden). I would then question the sources for this ruling, asking if the sources are trustworthy, how the sources are interpreted, if there are inconsistencies in interpretation, and if there are alternative interpretations. Only by becoming the dutiful pious son who listened to his father and abstained from sex and drugs could I make Him proud in this country.

But for once I did not act like His righteous son. I did not go with Him to the local *muṣallá* (a prayer hall smaller than a *mosque*) for the *ʿIshāʾ* congregation on that day. My religious garb, a plain black *thawb* and *ṭopī* (round skullcap), was fitting for a son of pious humility. But on me, it was always accompanied by a growing headache, as if a wire was slowly tightening around my skull. The headache was so great that He took notice of me massaging my temples after every *ṣalāh* (principal form of worship in Islam), booking a doctor's appointment the next day to get it checked. He was always concerned for my health. But the palm He placed on my forehead, His interrogatory questions, and the slew of syrups and damp towels He gave me were useless. The doctor would not find anything either, so He would ultimately know nothing. Not unless I revealed a secret that was kept hidden all my life. He had an old-fashioned sensibility since He was born a decade after the second World War, so I thought about broaching the subject with a smaller issue. If I found the right words, He would be convinced.

I probably had twenty minutes to figure out what to say before He returned from *ʿIshāʾ*. Again, I imagined Him on the other side of the glass dining table, His wrinkled face a tender image of concern reflecting the father who doted on His child. He would listen if I found the right words.

"I must tell you something," I said. "Something is wrong with me." He raised His eyebrows, the way one would when learning a friend has come down with a sickness.

"What's going on?" He asked. "Is it something about university?" I shook my head.

"What is it?"

I did not answer.

"Come on, talk to me," He said, His voice softening. "We should not keep any secrets. We should be as close as this." He raised the index and middle finger of His right hand and

joined them together, their closeness symbolizing our own closeness. I chose my words carefully.

"I want to make you happy, but to do that, I … need to be unhappy."

"Why would you think that?" He asked. It was like telling Him I needed to go to the moon.

"I would never want you unhappy," He declared.

"It is because of … my face," I said. "The hair looks dirty and ugly. It needs to go."

He cocked His head in confusion before grabbing my jaw to inspect it.

Personal space is not a very strong concept among South Asian cultures. He was the eldest of nine children, so He was socialized in a way that regarded the casual invasion of space as an expected part of family. But that did not reduce my discomfort, raised in this country as an only-child. The sensation of His fingers reminded me that I was a cross between a rat and a goat. The hair was thin and wiry, curling like misshapen coils. They covered my cheeks and chin in messy patches which I yearned to tear out. The skin underneath was rough and bumpy too, acne and ingrown hairs festering like a virulent fungus.

"It looks fine," He said.

"I could take better care of the skin if I could see it properly," I replied. "There are bumps and pimples hidden under the hair."

"Come on," He said in that familiar tone of exasperation bordering on disappointment. His tone got like that whenever I said or did something that seemed like I had a mental deficiency. I never quite got used to it.

"How many times have I told you, 'Comb and oil your face and beard after you take a shower?'" He chuckled, pointing at all the combing and oiling He did for His own white beard,

which had grown long and straight down to His sternum, appearing like a Bengali version of Santa Claus. He did not have a big pot belly though because of all His physical activity working on the apartment. He stood up to get a bottle of baby oil for demonstration, but I grabbed His wrist.

He did not take the hint. The lump in my throat threatened to choke me. He could easily cite the verses of the *Qurʾān* (the sacred scripture of Islam) forbidding one from changing the creation of God and that would be the end of it.[1] I had to pay careful attention to my words, each one a potential mine.

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"I want it shaved," I said.

He was taken aback.

"This is forbidden. The beard is the *Sunnah* (practices of the *Prophet of Islam*)."

It is considered a good deed to imitate *The Prophet of Islam* since *The Prophet* embodies everything an ideal Muslim should strive towards. Some *Sunnah* are optional, but for some people, the *Sunnah* are a demonstration of one's faith and commitment to Islam, and so may become de facto *farḍ* (obligatory). For such people, there should be a rigid border separating the "authentic" Muslims who take religion seriously, and the "fashion statement" Muslims, for whom Islam is nothing more than pretty clothes, pretty architecture, pretty calligraphy, and the vapid countercultural spirituality fitting for white hippies.

An example of this appeared when I used to tie my hair back in a ponytail. He took me aside and lectured for an hour on the men in the *Jāhilīyya* (the age of ignorance before the time of *The Prophet*). He often lectured for more than an hour, going on many tangents. The gist of this lecture was that the men in Arabia before the time of *The Prophet* tied their hair back to

show off their tribal pride, and this tribal pride helped contribute to the long, pointless blood feuds that plagued pre-Islamic Arabia. The *Sunnah* changed this, keeping the hair even and down to the earlobes or shoulders. I was tired by the time His lecture ended, so I just told Him I understood, after which He kissed my forehead and said that I was the best son in the entire world. I went for a full shave. He protested, insisting that I keep at least a centimeter. But I did not want to think about this issue at all anymore, so I removed any ambiguity over which side of the border I was on.

"I only want to be a good Muslim," I said to demonstrate due respect.

He looked into my soul with stern and loving concern. "The authentic *ḥadīth* (sayings attributed to *The Prophet of Islam*) are very clear," He said while grabbing His phone to find these *ḥadīth* on the internet. Once He found them, he scrolled down to read the Arabic and English translation. In doing so, His spiritual authority became unquestionable.

"*Man tashabbaha bi-qawmin fa-huwa minhum*," He recited. "He who copies any people is one of them."[2]

"*Laʿana Rasūlullāhi ṣallā-llāhu ʿalayhi wa sallam al-mutashabbihīna mina r-rijāli bi'l-nisāiʾ wa-l-mutashabbihāti mina n-nisāiʾ bi'l-rijāl*. *The Prophet* cursed those men who are in the similitude of women and those women who are in the similitude of men."[3]

"*Aḥfū al-shawāriba wa-aʿfū al-liḥā.* Trim closely the moustache, and let the beard grow."[4]

The rules laid out by these *ḥadīth* were clear. A Muslim cannot shave his facial hair. It would defy the advice of *The Prophet*, it would be an imitation of non-Muslims, and it would be an imitation of the opposite gender. The border was firmly defined and heavily policed. But I hoped to cross it legally.

Ḥadīth are records of what *The Prophet of Islam* told his *Ṣaḥāba* (Companions of *The Prophet*). The idea is that *The Prophet* passed on his *Sunnah* to the *Ṣaḥāba*, who verbally and culturally passed it on to the next generation (the *tābiʿī*) by recalling *ḥadīth* from memory, who did the same with the next generation (the *tābiʿ at-tābiʿī*), until these *ḥadīth* were recorded on paper in the third century of Islam for experts to reference. Many are now digitally recorded on the internet for contemporary Muslims to reference too.

Some people write off *ḥadīth* as an intergenerational game of broken telephone plagued by errors in transmission. That argument does not work with orthodox Muslims. Rejecting *ḥadīth* conceptually is tantamount to rejecting Islam in their eyes. I read about *ḥadīth* to acquire a more nuanced view, but what I found generally supported orthodoxy. According to Mohammad Hashim Kamali's 2005 book, *A Textbook of Ḥadīth Studies: Authenticity, Compilation, Classification and Criticism of Ḥadīth*, some of these *ḥadīth* were written down ad hoc by some of the *Ṣaḥāba* in *Ṣaḥīfa* (booklet) collections.[5] In Islam's second century, scholars started thematically classifying *ḥadīth* in *Muṣannaf* (classified) collections, and in Islam's third century, scholars started paying attention to the *isnād* (chain of narration) of *ḥadīth*, creating the *Musnad* (supported) compilations like those of *Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal* (d. 855). Then rules of verification were applied to remove questionable *ḥadīth* (i.e.: can one prove that two transmitters in a chain of narration met one another), creating the *Ṣaḥīḥ* (sound/authentic) compilations trusted by Muslims today like *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*.[6]

The *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī* collection allegedly took 600,000 *aḥādīth* (plural of *ḥādīth*) and reduced them to 9,082 (2,602 discounting repetitions) authentic ones, which was verified by the leading *ʿulamāʾ* (Islamic scholars) of that time.[7] The *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* collection reduced 300,000 *aḥādīth* to 10,000 (3,030 discounting repetitions).[8] The *Sunan Abū Dāwūd* collection reduced

500,000 *aḥādīth* to 5,274 (4,800 discounting repetitions), which included both *Ṣaḥīḥ* and *Ḥasan* (fair) *ḥadīth*.[9] The *Ibn Mājah* and *Tirmidhi* collections includes *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *Ḥasan*, and *Ḍaʿīf* (weak) *ḥadīth*.[10] Faced with this overwhelming level of scholarship, I could perhaps question *ḥadīth* from the compilations authored by *at-Tirmidhi* (d. 892) and *Ibn Mājah* (d. 887), but to argue against the authenticity of *ḥadīth* from the compilations authored by *Abū Dāwūd* (d. 889), *Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj* (d. 875), and *al-Bukhārī* (d. 870), I would need a PhD in *ḥadīth* analysis. Only then could I cross the border without breaking any complicated and esoteric laws.

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"What do you think I should do?" I asked.

"The answer is clear," He declared. "Our *nafs* (base desires/lower self/ego/soul)[11] pave the way to *Jahannam* (hell). We must suppress them. If I am angry, do I act on it? Of course not. I must suppress my anger and channel it towards good deeds, and if I remain steadfast, *inshāʾAllāh* (God-willing), we will be rewarded. Like a flame starved of air, the *nafs* will naturally go away with time."

I wanted to believe the analogies He espoused, but the scientific scholarship on this misunderstanding of psychology is clear. A 2022 literature review found that LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, queer, and other minority identities like intersex, asexual, aromantic, etc.) youths who experienced conversion therapy had far worse outcomes than those who did not experience conversion therapy, who in-turn had far worse outcomes than those who received affirmative therapy. Conversion therapy is associated with greater anxiety/psychological distress (47% vs 34% vs 20%), depression (65% vs 27% vs 14%), substance abuse (67% vs 50% vs 26%), and attempted suicide (63% vs 22% vs 3%).[12] The authors of the literature review used an economic model to calculate the economic burdens of these outcomes. Conversion therapy costs

$97,985 per individual, totalling $9.23 billion in the US. Affirmative therapy's benefits outweigh its costs, saving $40,329 per individual on average, saving $1.81 billion in the US.[13]

This is not surprising. The human mind is not a flame. When it is starved and suppressed, its dispositions do not disappear. They transform, and this transformation is healthy or not depending on the mental pathologies that lead a person to bend their mind in that way. One person can suppress their anger and healthily channel it towards good deeds because they convinced themselves that their anger is best used building themselves and others up. Another person can do the exact same thing but be entirely unhealthy because they convinced themselves that their anger is worthless and evil. I should be thankful that I did not have to worry about institutionalized conversion therapy, which would have undoubtedly made everything worse. But I did not have to worry about that because I was always suppressing my *nafs*, leading me to wonder if the costs of illegally crossing the border exceeded $97,985.

He got up from the table and went to my side to hug me, asking me if I understood.

"No," I answered.

While I lack the expertise to question *ḥadīth* themselves, perhaps I could question the way He applies them, and in doing so make Him change the border.

"If Western culture changes so that pink becomes manly and green becomes womanly, would it become permissible to wear pink and impermissible to wear green?" I asked Him. "If their men had long beards and trimmed their moustaches and wore our clothes, would it become forbidden for us to continue wearing these clothes to avoid imitation? Why should we have to depend on Western culture so much?"

He stroked His beard while thinking about what I said.

"There are specific rulings established by the *Qurʾān* and *ḥādīth*," He answered. "How to

keep the hair. What parts of the body to cover (*ʿawrah*). Who wears jewellery. Regardless of whatever Western culture does, the most important thing is following the authentic *ḥadīth*."

He would focus more on defining a specific Muslim border that I could not cross than on clarifying the limits of a Western border. If the Muslim border entered Western territory, that might be nice, barring the risk that they use it as an opportunity to hijack Islamic culture. But the other way around would be an intolerable incursion into Muslim territory, and a true Muslim must maintain the integrity of whatever ideological territory Islam has left.

Perhaps I could cross the border by clarifying different levels of border security.

"Does the *ḥadīth* state if the beard is *farḍ*, *sunnah*, or *mubāḥ* (allowed)?" I asked.

Fiqh (Islamic law as understood/applied by mankind) categorizes actions into five general categories: *ḥarām*, *makrūh* (reprehensible/discouraged), *mubāḥ*, *sunnah*/*mustaḥabb* (recommended), and *farḍ*/*wājib* (obligatory), with some variation in terms depending on the legal scholar.[14] Muslims nowadays often downplay the relevance of these categories, defaulting to a rigid *ḥalāl–ḥarām* dichotomy on most subjects. For them, the border must be all-or-nothing. You are either a citizen, or you are not. There can be no ambiguity.

He told me that the wording of the *ḥadīth* determines the category. He quoted one as a demonstration, stating that "the acts according to *fiṭra* (innate belief)" are "clipping the moustache, letting the beard grow, using the tooth-stick (*miswāk*), snuffing water in the nose, cutting the nails, washing the finger joints, plucking the hair under the armpits, shaving the pubes and cleaning one's private parts with water."[15] Since belief is connected to these acts, it must be *farḍ* to maintain the beard and trim the moustache.

Perhaps an inconsistency in border security would work in my favour.

"What about circumcision?" I asked. "The *Qurʾān* and *ḥādīth* forbids one from

needlessly changing the creation of God with things like tattoos,[16] so why would circumcision remain mandatory when modern hygiene and medicine nullified its benefits?"

There is an inconsistency in Muslim criticisms of tattoos and body modifications as unnecessary and unnatural desecrations of the body. Muslims are already unnecessarily unnatural. For the *fiqh* to remain consistent, they must prioritize one over the other (in some *ḥadīth*, circumcision is included as a sign of *fiṭra*).[17] If He did prioritize naturalness, I could make an argument that circumcision, the *miswāk*, the beard, and the moustache are all *mustaḥabb* or *mubāḥ*.

"What is important is following the tradition of the prophets," He answered without hesitation. "All the prophets were circumcised, so it is mandatory for Muslims so long as their health and wellbeing are not at stake. A true believer will do everything *The Prophet* did."

The Prophetic tradition overrules everything else regardless of the relevance of the rationale behind that tradition. That was how He could criticize tattoos without sensing a contradiction from circumcision. To be clear, the health and wellbeing caveats do not include mental health. Pray your way to happiness, and do not cross the border.

All that leaves is a controversial argument.

"What about slavery?" I asked.

His face went blank.

"The *Qurʾān* permits slavery,[18] and *The Prophet* and his *Ṣaḥāba* accepted it in society and war.[19] So why would it be permissible to outlaw slavery from Islam and the Muslim world now[20] while forcing circumcision and controlling people's hair by arguing that *The Prophet* did these things?"

He furrowed his eyebrows.

"Stop asking these strange questions," He snapped.

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I realized then that logic would not work. I hoped that contemplating the *Qurʾān* and *aḥādīth* would lead me to a loophole that could facilitate a legal crossing of the border, or at least strengthen my religiosity. All it really did was reveal the irrationality behind the *fiqh*. The rules and principles contradicted each other, and everyone reinterpreted the contradictions according to what justified their preexisting beliefs.

I'm not supposed to imitate non-Muslims, and I'm not supposed to imitate the other gender, but everyone else decides when something becomes an imitation and how strictly Muslims must separate themselves from others to avoid imitation. I'm not supposed to alter the creation of God, so I must curse tattooists, plastic surgeons, and transgender people. Except when I alter the bodies of infant boys. Then I'm just reducing the risk of disease,[21] even if the risk of surgical complications,[22] the pain, the lack of consent, and the benefits of modern hygiene and medicine make circumcision a moot point for rich countries. I must curse transgender people for arrogantly satisfying their depraved desires over the wisdom inherent in God's creation, even as I forcefully alter intersex infants to satisfy my faith in the gender binary. I'm supposed to strictly follow the Prophetic tradition even when the rationale behind the *ḥadīth* is void. Except when something like slavery is politically reprehensible. Then the *Sunnah* is suddenly so flexible and bound by historical circumstances.[23] But only on that issue. Everything else in the *Sunnah* is strict and universal. I was the only fool who believed this legal system provided consistency and integrity, sacrificing my mind and soul just to maintain someone else's barely hidden ideology.

Of course, my sacrifice was paltry compared to His. While we are not as opulent and consumerist as the average white North American, our lives are no doubt privileged compared to

other South Asian immigrants. The apartment's facilities functioned adequately, the pests were not that concerning (He used caulk to seal every crack where a roach could hide), there was not much crime in the neighborhood, everything we needed was walkable, we had decent access to public services, we were relatively close to a *mosque* (a place/building where Islamic prayers are performed) and a walkable local *muṣallá* in a shopping plaza, and we were relatively close to downtown. This apartment had everything for a life worth living so long as one ignored the corruption and mismanagement typical in condominiums.

This was no accident. I am not the immigrant. He and His wife are. They are the ones who moved to this country. They are the ones who worked backbreaking jobs day in and day out to get here. When I was born, we lived in a neighborhood with a sizable number of Bengali immigrants. We moved a couple times in the following years, though I was too young to recall these memories, and by the time I entered the third grade, we settled in this apartment. Pakistani and East Asian immigrants were predominant in this neighborhood, but that was not a significant issue, especially considering all the effort He expended turning this apartment into a home. Everywhere I looked held thousands of hours of labour. The green walls, the hardwood floor, the fridge and dining table, the windowsill which held a collection of potted plants. It all contained his sweat, expended to create a home that was better and cheaper than if He had hired someone else to get it done. It felt impossible to reveal that secret while I was surrounded by everything testifying to the sacrifices He made for my sake. His wife did not appreciate it, though.

Maybe if I was more honest and direct, things would be different. I imagined a different approach to our conversation. This time He was sitting in a chair next to me, and I poured my heart out the way I imagined children who trusted their parents might.

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"Doesn't everything we believe seem so … new?" I asked. "A couple centuries ago, things like slavery and child labour were unavoidable because there was no other way of maintaining large civilizations. But now we reject these things because we live in a world where machines can do a lot of that work."[24]

His face remained stone-cold, completely indecipherable, but I kept going.

"Do you ever wonder if the way we feel about slavery will be the same way Muslims in a thousand years will feel about other things too?[25] What if they live in a world where they can grow all their meat in laboratories? Will this make them believe that it is categorically *ḥarām* to kill or eat any animals? What if they live in a world where war between countries is no longer relevant to pursuing justice. Will this make them believe that war is categorically *ḥarām*? What if they live in a world where all criminals can be reformed? Will this make them believe that it is *ḥarām* to whip, imprison, or execute a criminal? What if Muslims in a thousand years live in a time when boys do not need to grow beards and trim moustaches and call themselves men?"

"*Astaghfirullāh* (I seek forgiveness from *Allāh*)," He spat immediately, the whites of His eyes bulging out in anger.

"This is stupid," He cursed.

"This is insane," He cursed.

"This is a Western ideology," He condemned.

I decided then that His kind would never listen to me.

"Oh, come on," I spat back. "If you were born four hundred years in the past, you would probably believe it was *ḥarām* to outlaw slavery because the *Qurʾān* forbids us from making something *ḥalāl* into something *ḥarām*."[26]

He clicked His tongue at this speculative accusation, getting up to pace the room.

"If you were born four hundred years in the future," I continued, "you might believe homophobia is *ḥarām* because the *Qurʾān* says that God does not burden a person beyond their capacity,[27] that God commands us to stand for justice,[28] and the verses which condemn homosexuality[29] only truly condemn sexual assault and adultery.[30] You might even write off all the homophobic *ḥadīth* as inauthentic too."[31]

"What kind of Muslim compares morality to slavery?" He roared, His face curling into a mask of disgust. "This is *bidʿa* (heretical innovation). This is *kufr* (disbelief)."

I clicked my tongue, standing up to face Him.

"In the *fiqh*, marriage was understood using analogies to slavery. The husband's dower granted him control and sexual access to the husband's wife (*milk al-nikāḥ*), which also granted him unilateral right over divorce (*ṭalāq*)."[32]

"I've been far too lenient," He lamented while ignoring what I said.

"The master's purchase granted him control and sexual access to the master's concubine (*milk al-yamīn*), which also granted him unilateral right over manumission (*ʿitq*)."[33]

He massaged His temples to deal with the pain.

"I should have sent you to a real *madrasah* (Islamic school) in Arabia. I should have not allowed you to touch these Western devices and look at their books and movies and media. I should control everything you read and watch and listen to so that you turn back into a real Muslim."

I tried exposing the insanity behind this appeal to authenticity.

"Sexual morality back then did not even consider consent or equality that important.[34] How can the equal, consensual, and monogamous marital morals promoted by modern Muslims be anything less than *bidʿa*?[35] How can we pretend to have ever been 'authentic' at any point in

time?"[36]

He did not give my reasoning a momentary thought.

"From now on, you will recite the *Qurʾān* every morning and night in front of me. We will go to a real Muslim country. You will pray every *ṣalāh* at the *masjid* (synonym for *mosque*) next to me, and you will pray and repent, and they will make you stop thinking like a crazy person."

"Crazy person?" I asked incredulously. "I'm the only person I know who didn't drive themselves insane by trying to veil their emotions in logic while pretending that it made me righteous."

I paced the room, the energy in my body wound like a spring with nowhere to go. I flicked my fingers in my hands to release the excess energy, but it was not enough. Not even the hypocrisy of angrily proclaiming that I was not driven by emotion could make me calm down.

"It was all a lie!" I yelled. "Your people constantly bend your faith to pass off your emotions as God's commands. I could have bent my faith at any point just like the rest of you, yet here I foolishly believed that my sacrifices would somehow convince you to do the same."

"*Yā Allāh* (O God)," He groaned. "I broke my back supporting you and our family back home. If you turn on the news right now you will see children losing their lives because of evil people that want to destroy the *ummah* (the Islamic religious community/nation). How did I allow you to become so ungrateful? I should kick you from this house to make you learn respect."

I clicked my tongue, burning with anger.

"I used to dream that one day I would be loved for who I was, too stupid to realize that day will never come. Your kind will always turn me into someone who doesn't feel anything,

who doesn't want anything, who doesn't believe in anything."

These prejudicial words borne from pain did not make me feel better. Instead, they incensed something much colder and crueller, something which hated everything that exists.

"If your kind was wiped off the face of the earth, the only thing I would feel was envy that I did not join you."

His eyes bulged out of His head. His hands, callused from decades of carpentry, reached out to me. He would not hit me, I think, even when filled with fury. But it was too late. It was all too real. It was all too predictable. It was all in my imagination, but my fist launched forwards anyways.

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Pain radiated from my hand where it connected with the concrete wall. I collapsed on a coach, my head in my hands.

There were no right words to make Him listen. If He has an inkling about what I was, He will clamp down. If I push back with what I learned, He will turn it back on me and shut down any controversial comparisons. If I was honest with Him, He will make me regret it for the rest of my life, and I will not be strong enough to stop the worst parts of myself from lashing out.

There was only one real option.

"He cannot be allowed to have an inkling," I told myself. "He cannot know a single thing about me. He must not have any reason to search for who I am. He must believe there are no secrets between us."

That was the best way to keep a secret. If He does not have a clue that a secret exists in the first place, He will have no reason to probe me for secrets or police the borders around my identity. A secret acquires a shelf life the moment others have a clue that one exists. No amount

of lies or deceptions after that can stop the truth from eventually coming out.

"The only path is becoming the pious son He wants me to be. I must purge everything in my life that could give Him a single indication that there was something amiss."

I promised this to myself and to Him. It would spare me the insanity that would come if He knew. It would spare Him the religious duty to "fix" me once He knew what I was. Sure, it meant that I had to attempt a self-induced conversion therapy, but at least I alone controlled the suffering that was inflicted on me. I could relax the suffering when I needed to, though not by too much since the mask is necessary even when nobody is around to maintain cover stories and prevent slip-ups. Besides, I've lived a life better than most in a place envied by most. Twenty years is good enough. It must simply cost $97,985 for someone like me to live in this country.

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After that Promise was firmly carved into my soul, the door to our apartment swung open. The real Him returned from the *ʿIshāʾ ṣalāh*, a second sun beaming in His flowing white *thawb*. I put on the mask, appearing like nothing happened. When He saw me, He hugged me tight, showing me a piece of paper. It was a crayon drawing made by one of the kindergarteners at the school next to our apartment.

The sky was blue, filled with fluffy white clouds. At the center were two stick figures, a small pink one with long black hair, and a larger oval-shaped one with a bright red stop sign and a great white beard. He worked as the crossing guard for the school, so the kid must have drawn Him for an assignment and was too proud of their artistry to wait for the coming Monday to give it to Him. He was always good with kids. When I observed Him in His job, He was talkative with them, as He was with everyone. He would scold the children who did not obey the traffic laws, but in the way an older uncle would. He used to keep every project, every drawing, every

test, and every certificate, proclaiming with pride that I was the best son in the whole world. I could not really recall these memories of my youth, but I must have just been bad at recalling them. Surely, the version of Him in my mind was worse than who He truly was.

But as He described the good character of this child and the parents who picked her up after school, a video played from His phone. He often listened to Islamic lectures on social media while returning from *ṣalāh*. This time, a scholar educated in a Saudi university reiterated a portion of the second verse of *Sūra* (chapter) *Al-Māʾida* (The Table):[37]

> *Wataʿāwanū* (And help one another) *ʿalā l-biri* (in righteousness) *wa-taqwā* (and piety/righteousness), *walā taʿāwanū* (but do not help one another) *ʿalā l-ith'mi* (in sin) *wal-ʿud'wān* (and transgression).[38]

The scholar then stated that if he rented out a shop for a bank that does *ribā* (interest), or for a bar, or for a brothel, he would receive a portion of that sin for assisting in it. Thereafter, he answered a question from a viewer about whether it would be *ḥarām* to rent out a shop to a barber who performed *ḥarām* haircuts.[39]

"If those working in this barber shop do *ḥarām* things: *ḥarām* haircuts, they shave beards, they maybe do facial–I don't know what you call it–makeup or whatever, you know, pluck eyebrows and the like, then definitely what they are earning is *ḥarām*, and the rent they are paying me is *ḥarām* for collaborating with them on such a sin."[40]

He did not seem to pay attention to the video. He often tuned out whatever was playing on His phone when He was deep in conversation. But I remained paralyzed by ambiguity.

Ch 1 Notes

[1] Muḥammad Taqi-ud-Din Al-Hilali and Muḥammad Muhsin Khan, trans. *The Noble Qurʾān: English Translations of the meanings and commentary* (Madinah: King Fahd Glorious Qur'ān Printing Complex, 2015), 4:119, 30:30.
[2] Note that the transliteration with diacritical marks was generated using ChatGPT and the translation is not an exact copy of what was written in the sources: *Abū Dāwūd Sulaymān ibn al-Ashʿath ibn Isḥāq al-Azdī Al-Sijistānī*, "(1506) Chapter: A Garment Of Fame And Vanity," In *Sunan Abū Dāwūd*, Book 34, *Ḥadīth* 12, accessed Aug 12, 2024, https://sunnah.com/abudawud/34/12.; *Muḥammad ibn ʿĪsā At-Tirmidhī*, "(7) Chapter: What Has Been Related About It Being Disliked To Gesture With Hand When Giving Salam," In *Jami` At-Tirmidhi*, Book 42, *Ḥadīth* 8, accessed Aug 12, 2024, https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi/42/8.; ChatGPT, Response to "Can you check the diacritical marks and definitions of terms in various languages to determine if they are correct?" *OpenAI*, October 8, 2024, https://chatgpt.com/share/67057bf7-2858-8006-b508-3156094896dd.
[3] Note that the transliteration with diacritical marks was generated using ChatGPT and the translation is not an exact copy of what was written in the sources: *Muḥammad ibn Ismāʿīl ibn Ibrāhīm al-Juʿfī Al-Bukhārī*, "(61) Chapter: Men who are in the similitude of women, and women who are in the similitude of men" and "(62) Chapter: The dismissal of such men as are in similitude of women, from the houses." In *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī*, Book 77, *Ḥadīth* 102–104, accessed Aug 12, 2024, https://sunnah.com/Bukhārī/77/102-104.; *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī*, Book 64, *Ḥadīth* 354.; *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī*, Book 67, *Ḥadīth* 168.; *Sunan Abū Dāwūd*, Book 43, *Ḥadīth* 156–158.; *Sunan Abū Dāwūd*, Book 34, *Ḥadīth* 78–80.; *Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Yazīd Ibn Mājah*, "(38) Chapter: Effeminate Men," In *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, Book 20, *Ḥadīth* 82, https://sunnah.com/ibnmajah/20/82.; *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, Book 9, *Ḥadīth* 58–60.; *Jami` At-Tirmidhi*, Book 43, *Ḥadīth* 56–57.; ChatGPT, Response to "Can you check the diacritical marks and definitions of terms in various languages to determine if they are correct?" *OpenAI*, October 8, 2024, https://chatgpt.com/share/67057bf7-2858-8006-b508-3156094896dd.
[4] Note that transliteration with diacritical marks was generated using ChatGPT and the translation is not an exact copy of what was written in the sources; *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī*, Book 77, *Ḥadīth* 105–110.; *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī*, Book 79, *Ḥadīth* 69–72.; *Abū al-Ḥusayn ʿAsākir ad-Dīn Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj ibn Muslim*, "(16) Chapter: The characteristics of the fitrah," In *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Book 2, *Ḥadīth* 64–72, accessed Aug 12, 2024, https://sunnah.com/muslim/2/64-72.; *Sunan Abū Dāwūd*, Book 1, *Ḥadīth* 53–54.; *Sunan Abū Dāwūd*, Book 35, *Ḥadīth* 40–43.; *Jami` At-Tirmidhi*, Book 43, *Ḥadīth* 33–34.; ChatGPT, Response to "Can you check the diacritical marks and definitions of terms in various languages to determine if they are correct?" *OpenAI*, October 8, 2024, https://chatgpt.com/share/67057bf7-2858-8006-b508-3156094896dd.
[5] Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *A Textbook of Ḥadīth Studies: Authenticity, Compilation, Classification and Criticism of Ḥadīth* (Markfield, Leicestershire: Islamic Foundation, 2005), p. 22–27, 31.
[6] Kamali, *Ḥadīth Studies*, p. 29–33, 37.
[7] Kamali, *Ḥadīth Studies*, p. 33–34.
[8] Kamali, *Ḥadīth Studies*, p. 36.
[9] Kamali, *Ḥadīth Studies*, p. 38–39.
[10] Kamali, *Ḥadīth Studies*, p. 40–42.
[11] The word *nafs* can be difficult to translate. Orthodox Muslims typically translate it as "base desires," associating it with animalistic instincts that must be constantly suppressed as a source of temptation towards sin. The *Qurʾānic* translations typically describe it as the soul in various states, the *nafsu l-muṭ'ma-ina* (the soul that is at peace), the *nafsi l-lawāma* (the soul that blames itself), and the *nafsa la-ammāratun bil-sū* (the soul that enjoins evil). Omid Safi generally describes it as the emotions which tend to focus on oneself, like hate and selfish anger: Al-Hilali and Khan, *Qurʾān*, 12:53, 75:2, 89:27.; "Verse (12:53) - Word by Word," *Qurʾānic Arabic Corpus Word by Word Grammar, Syntax and Morphology of the Holy Quran*, accessed Aug 12, 2024, https://corpus.quran.com/wordbyword.jsp?chapter=12&verse=53.; "Verse (75:2) - Word by Word," *Quranic Arabic Corpus*.; "Verse (89:27) - Word by Word," *Quranic Arabic Corpus*.; Rumi Forum (@RumiForum), "Dr. Omid Safi - How to Read Rumi: The GPS of Divine Secrets," *YouTube*, March 1, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CN6O1p2x6TE&t=840s, 14:56–17:29, 37:53–39:18, 45:53–47:22, 49:17–50:04.
[12] Anna Forsythe, Casey Pick, Gabriel Tremblay, Shreena Malaviya, Amy Green, and Karen Sandman, "Humanistic and Economic Burden of Conversion Therapy Among LGBTQ Youths in the United States," *JAMA Pediatrics* 176, no. 5 (2022): p. 493, 496–497, https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2022.0042.
[13] Forsythe et al, "Conversion Therapy," p. 493, 497–499.

[14] Devin J. Stewart, "shari'a," In *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought*, ed. Gerhard Böwering, Patricia Crone, and Mahan Mirza (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 497.
[15] *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Book 2, *Ḥadīth* 71.
[16] Al-Hilali and Khan, *Qurʾān*, 4:119, 30:30.; *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī*, Book 77, *Ḥadīth* 146–164.
[17] *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī*, Book 79, *Ḥadīth* 69–72; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Book 2, Ḥadīth 64–65.
[18] Al-Hilali and Khan, *Qurʾān*, 4:24–25, 23:5–6, 24:31, 33:50.; Bernard K. Freamon, *Possessed by the Right Hand: The Problem of Slavery in Islamic Law and Muslim Cultures* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), p. 128–134.
[19] Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qurʾān, Ḥadīth, and Jurisprudence*, 1st ed (Oxford, England: Oneworld Publications, 2006), p. 39–40, 46–50.; Freamon, *Possessed by the Right Hand*, p. 140–143.; *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī*, Book 64, *Ḥadīth* 182. *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī*, Book 97, *Ḥadīth* 38. *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Book 16, *Ḥadīth* 146–163.
[20] Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, p. 41–43, 51–52.; Freamon, *Possessed by the Right Hand*, p. 333.
[21] Ronald H. Gray, "Infectious Disease Male Circumcision for Preventing HPV Infection," *Nature Reviews Urology* 6, no. 6 (2009): p. 298–299.
[22] Daniel Mønsted Shabanzadeh, Signe Clausen, Katrine Maigaard, and Mikkel Fode, "Male Circumcision Complications − A Systematic Review, Meta-Analysis and Meta-Regression," *Urology (Ridgewood, N.J.) 152 (2021): p. 25, 27, 29.*
[23] Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, p. 41–43, 51–52.
[24] Of course, the degree to which the modern world "rejects" slavery and child labour in practical terms is debatable. This is even more apparent when compared to serfdom, which occupies the de jure and de facto grey areas around what is practiced in the modern and ancient worlds (both how historical serfdom could resemble slavery and how modern work can resemble serfdom and slavery). Regardless, I think most people would find it reasonable to think modern governments and societies could not even raise the de jure standards of living for workers without modern machines to smooth over the economic transition (while acknowledging that the de jure standard does not always translate to de facto standard).
[25] Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, p. 52–53.
[26] Note that it is debatable whether the relevant *Qurʾānic* verses would strongly support this argument against the abolition of slavery, depending on if the word used in some of these verses, *ṭayyibāti* (good/pure things) encompasses all things that are *ḥalāl*, or only the things that are *farḍ* and/or the things that are encouraged by the *sunnah*. Regardless, it did not stop people in history from using this argument against abolition: "Verse (5:87) - Word by Word," *Quranic Arabic Corpus*.; Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, p. 43.; Al-Hilali and Khan, *Qurʾān*, 5:87, 7:32, 16:116, 66:1.; Freamon, *Possessed by the Right Hand*, p. 319–320, 322–325.
[27] Al-Hilali and Khan, *Qurʾān*, 2:286, 7:42, 23:62.; Scott Alan Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflection on Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims* (Oxford, England: Oneworld Publications, 2010), p. 48.
[28] Al-Hilali and Khan, *Qurʾān*, 4:135.
[29] Al-Hilali and Khan, *Qurʾān*, 7:80–84, 11:77–83, 29:28–30, 26:160–175, 4:15–16.
[30] Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam*, p. 54–56.
[31] Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam*, p. 54–56.
[32] Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, p. xxv, 3–6, 34–36.
[33] Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, p. 36, 39–41, 43–44.
[34] Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, p. xxvi, 48–51, 56–57.
[35] Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, p. xv–xvii, xxv, 6–7, 51–52.
[36] Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, p. 95–96.
[37] Al-Hilali and Khan, *Qurʾān*, 5:2.
[38] "Verse (5:2) - Word by Word," *Quranic Arabic Corpus*.
[39] Assimalhakeem (@assimalhakeem), "Renting my place to a barber shop when barber might shave beard etc, is income halal assim al hakeem," *YouTube*, May 11, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QNdcRFfTTDs.
[40] Note that while this scholar is sometimes criticized in Muslim circles for lacking a high degree of expertise, those who agree with him might demand criticism focusing on the argument he presents, not ad hominem fallacies. Criticisms focusing only on this scholar's argument might interrogate what counts as "helping one another" on sin and to what degree the limits of what counts as "helping" is arbitrarily defined according to the biases of the scholar. Would he also condemn a person for purchasing a *ḥalāl* haircut at a barber shop that may also perform *ḥarām* haircuts (in which case the money they give for the haircut would help in sin)? If a person got a haircut but then realized the barber shop gave *ḥarām* haircuts, would he approve that person cheating the barber shop by running away without paying (in which case they would impede the performance of sin) or would he prioritize the threat of violating Islamic contract duties (in which case they would commit a presumably lesser sin to avoid a presumably

greater sin)? If the person did not know if a barber shop performed *ḥarām* haircuts, what would they be obligated to research beforehand? If a barber shop did not do extreme acts of sin like shaving the beard, but still gave haircuts that was not included in the *sunnah* (i.e.: those that existed in the *Jāhilīyya*) would that count as helping commit sin (this would disqualify just about every barber shop in a non-Muslim country)? How much would second-degree "helping" count (i.e.: getting a haircut from a barber shop that only performs *ḥalāl* haircuts while knowing that the barbers from that shop use their money to buy alcohol)? The scholar's reasoning over their position in all these situations might indicate an arbitrary or inconsistent logic: Assimalhakeem (@assimalhakeem), "Renting my place to a barber shop," 1:23–1:55.

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